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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the misuse of power among boards of education, central office and building administrators, teachers, and the media. It describes several cases: members of a board of education who hired a family member; an assistant superintendent who, out of jealousy, organized a smear campaign against a new principal; a high school principal who hired an underqualified assistant principal so that the former would look good by comparison; and a teachers' union president who undermined a new evaluation process. Experience shows that some questionable practices can be unique to a particular school, whereas some practices are commonplace. For example, the career track among upwardly mobile educators frequently emphasizes advancement over what is best for students. To lessen the frequency of such actions, the article suggests that schools move toward shared decision making. It states that proper training is important in this type of decision making. The paper also relates how one school system invited consultants who helped the district secure volunteers who would serve as representatives for each school, held a weekend retreat for board members so that they could learn more about shared decision making, and organized site-based teams that gave districtwide presentations on what is possible with a shared vision. (RJM)

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Excellent Schools Require Excellent Professionals

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Although criticizing American schools is not a new practice, such criticism often is inaccurate and destructive. Contrary to the negative scenarios reported in newspaper articles and television programs, our schools are performing better than the image that is usually presented. Better performance, however, does not always translate into demonstrated excellence. Based on local, decentralized standards, every school has the potential to be excellent, but efforts to reach this level can be negated by the self-serving needs of the key players. For example, boards of education, central office and building administrators, teachers, and the media are sources of power whose personal motives frequently prevent altruistic decision-making. While these forces have potential to cooperatively pursue goals of excellence, they also have the capacity to succumb to politics, nepotism, and other negative influences. Let me share a few school-related experiences from my role as a consultant to schools nationwide.

Recently, a school district developed a comprehensive process for hiring classroom teachers. Initially, a staff selection committee was formed whose members consisted of the assistant superintendents for personnel and instruction, building principals, department coordinators, teachers, and parents. The committee reviewed three thousand applications for five elementary school positions and selected one hundred individuals to make presentations. These applicants were made aware that they would be expected to introduce themselves, indicate their philosophy of education, provide pertinent information about their educational and experiential backgrounds, connect their backgrounds to the mission of the school district, demonstrate why they are the best applicants to be appointed, and write an essay concerning an authentic problem to be solved. When the presentations were completed and the writing samples were reviewed, the committee decided to ask twenty-five individuals to return for comprehensive interviews. This phase of the process resulted in fifteen candidates being invited to teach a lesson that would be observed by the committee. Afterward, the committee met to discuss their perspectives and to reach consensus concerning the

top ten applicants who would be interviewed by the superintendent of schools. When the superintendent completed the interviews, he sent the names of five outstanding candidates to the board of education for approval. Although this exhaustive process was not perfect, it considered different perspectives, lessened the incidence of politics and nepotism, and helped to objectify the selection of the best teachers who demonstrated potential to become master teachers.

Regrettably, the president and vice president of the board were angry because the people they recommended for the elementary school positions--one of whom was the vice president's wife-- were not hired. Although the entire board previously approved of the hiring process, the two unhappy members were effective in persuading the other members to revise the process to include board representation on the staff selection committee. Not surprisingly, this misuse of power resulted in the vice president's wife being appointed to a teaching position. Most of the educators who volunteered for the committee were so upset with the outcome that they vowed never to join another school committee. As catastrophic, the inclusion of a board member in every phase of the hiring process will inevitably lead to less qualified teachers being appointed to the school system and will simultaneously dampen the school's efforts to achieve excellence. Clearly, this board of education was guilty of micro management, nepotism, conflict of interest, and unethical behavior.

Although some boards of education have inappropriately used their authority for self-serving purposes, central office administrators alsc have perpetrated despicable acts. For example, an elementary school principal was promoted to the position of assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Replacing him as building principal was an assistant principal from another school system. Initially, the new principal established rapport with the teachers, children, and parents. She also was eager to learn about the school's innovative instructional programs , staff development efforts,

and other related matters. In a short time, she not only developed credibility as a caring and highly competent administrator, but also inspired the admiration of most of the key players.

Unfortunately, the assistant superintendent who fancied himself as the former "master" principal was unable to accept this positive feedback, which suggested that the new principal was more appreciated than he. This unscrupulous individual therefore initiated a smear campaign to discredit the new principal. He also secured the support of the board of education president, who, in turn, influenced several board members to support efforts to fire the principal. The supposed reason for the ouster was the principal's inadequately written observations and evaluations of teachers' performance; however, teachers and administrators who maintained a positive working relationship with the principal indicated that the "real" perverse motives for the firing were (1) the assistant superintendent's jealousy of the principal's success and (2) the board president's jealousy of the principal's new Mercedes Benz. One week after the firing, the board president bought a Mercedes Benz. Once again, some of the key players misused their power, which not only disrupted continuity of instruction but also jeopardized the school's efforts to achieve excellence.

In another example concerning misuse of power, a high school principal was given full authority to hire an assistant principal. During a four-week period, he reviewed resumes and interviewed candidates. Some of these candidates completed a doctoral degree, some had administrative experience, some demonstrated an innovative track record, some were professionally attired, and some had all of these qualities. The staff was therefore surprised when the newly appointed assistant principal did not possess any of these credentials. He was virtually unaccomplished and was probably no threat to the building principal. Ironically, the building principal often boasted that he was pursuing the best individual who would someday take over his responsibilities and,

thus, would add to his legacy of appointing an educational leader who was better than he.

As was expected, the principal's rhetoric did not match his pretentious goal of hiring the best individual. During his career, the assistant principal demonstrated poor problem solving strategies, minimal sensitivity to students' needs, and mediocre articulation with parents. This low-quality professional eventually retired after more than two decades of negative service to public education. In retrospect, the school system--and especially its students--would have benefited from a high-quality professional who supported efforts to achieve excellence.

Although questionable administrative behavior tends to be highly visible, teacher unions also have prevented schools from continuing an uninterrupted journey toward excellence. Last year, administrators and teachers in a suburban school district were considering a change in how both of them are evaluated. The current evaluative process consisted of annual narratives that described the administrators' and teachers' professional performance, connected the performance to previously developed goals, and stated new goals for the next school year. The proposed change, which was supported by the district office staff, would involve several options: (1) educators could request that annual narratives be used or (2) they could submit a portfolio with artifacts representing goals that were accomplished.

While the teacher union appeared to favor this direction, the union president suddenly asked the teachers to withdraw their support. The reason for this abrupt withdrawal was not immediately evident; however, during subsequent discussions between the union president and the assistant superintendent for personnel, the motive became clear. Apparently, the president was using the potential change in evaluative procedures as leverage to negotiate a new contract that was palatable to the teachers. In the past, the same leverage was used during contractual negotiations as the teacher

union interrupted progress toward implementing a variety of important innovations, including whole language, inclusion, and detracking. When negotiations were favorable to the union's perspective, obstruction of progress was lessened. Regrettably, these real-life dramas benefited teachers but were detrimental to children. Although classroom teachers are our most important resources, their contractual needs should not impact negatively on the quality of their students' education and should not impede efforts to promote excellence in the schools. With no naivete intended, teacher unions and school districts can find better ways of negotiating contracts.

Although contractual negotiations can be a major source of conflict, individuals' reactions to reading materials also can result in actions that detract from a school's potential to be excellent. Last year, **a** parent demanded that three popular magazines be removed from a middle school library because they provide content about sexual development and young romance. **Seventeen**, **Teen**, and **YM** were immediately removed by the school superintendent, who then activated the Curriculum Complaints Committee. The committee consisted of an assistant superintendent, two principals, two teachers, a library media specialist, and a parent who was the president of the PTA Council. When selecting individuals for the committee, the superintendent told them that he considered the magazines to be "disgusting." He also told the committee members that if they decided to return the magazines to the school library, he would veto their decision.

While openly admitting that the committee's work was a charade, the school chief met with the pastor of the local Catholic church and asked him for support. The pastor willingly provided such support during three Sunday masses, in which he criticized the majority of the Curriculum Complaints Committee for agreeing to reinstate the magazines, and he applauded the superintendent's courage in vetoing the committee's decision. The pastor also motivated his congregation to attend the next board of

education meeting and to demonstrate support for the superintendent's position. Finally, he wrote in his church bulletin that the magazines "impart information that goes against what we believe is the truth about sex as Catholic Christians." Not surprisingly, more than 200 "Catholic Christians" attended the board meeting and applauded the superintendent and board of education for "saving the children."

During this censorship crisis, a variety of related issues surfaced. Did the pastor breach the separation of church and state to accommodate his Catholic ideology? Were students' Constitutional rights violated? Since other poentially controversial resources are available in the middle school library, will they also be removed when a parent complains about their content? Were the superintendent's actions politically motivated? Why did he intentionally exacerbate the censorship crisis rather than ameliorate it with diplomacy? According to representatives of the administrators' and teachers' associations, the school chief was encountering resistance in negotiating a new contract for himself, and he therefore needed a volatile issue for conjuring up broad-based support for his leadership.

Regrettably, the motives and actions of this self-serving individual deprived middle school students of having access to magazines that they considered valuable for their growth and development. As important, the superintendent's unscrupulous direction created an emotionally charged context in which students, parents, teachers, and administrators were more focused on the censorship crisis than on teaching and learning. For example, many indicated that they felt betrayed by the superintendent's politically motivated behavior, and they wondered if he would ever support them with future issues. Specifically, they voiced a concern about controversial ideas being explored in content area classrooms. While such exploration and inquiry are necessary for enhancing higher-level thinking skills, would the school chief support these efforts if a parent complains? These and other concerns understandably dominated the school

conversation but regrettably diverted valuable energy from teaching and learning. Thus, another example exists wherein the key players focused heavily on matters of politics rather than on the school's mission to achieve excellence.

Interestingly, my varied roles as a consultant have helped me realize that some questionable practices are unique to a particular school, but others are common in many schools. For example, virtually every school has upward mobile educators who would like to be supervisors, principals, and central office administrators. Being ambitious is healthy and necessary for the growth of schools, and the most qualified individuals should be supported in their efforts to secure leadership positions. The best individuals, however, are not always appointed as educational leaders.

My colleagues and I are aware of numerous cases in which upward-mobile educators seemed to program themselves for climbing specific steps up the "ladder of success." The scenario usually involves individuals who teach for about four years, become assistant principals or department supervisors for about four years, move on to building principalships for about four years, and finally become central office administrators. During this journey toward success, the climbers often acquire positions at different schools, and this transience can impact negatively on the respective learning environments. Specifically, we have observed the following negative outcomes: (1) the climbers articulated smooth, pretentious concern for children's learning needs when, in fact, they were primarily focused on high-visibility innovations that would take them to their next step up the ladder; (2) these short-term innovations were rarely institutionalized and, therefore, did not benefit children's growth in lasting, substantive ways; and (3) short-term, "fluffy" innovations added to the many criticisms already generated against the schools, suggesting that money and time that should have been spent on quality teaching and learning were actually wasted on surface-level outcomes that "are here today and gone tomorrow." Clearly, schools need to engage in

practices that genuinely highlight the hiring of educational leaders who have demonstrated long-term commitments to meeting a diversity of learning needs. Included in this perspective are worthwhile innovations that have substantially benefited students and have simultaneously moved their school systems toward excellence.

What Can Be Done?

These school-related experiences represent only a sampling of the ways in which some of the key players have misused--and most likely continue to misuse--their power. Since describing these examples of negative behavior is easier than changing them, permit me to offer a humble suggestion that probably will not change people's personal motives and agendas but possibly will affect the way they treat people. I am recommending that school systems move in the direction of shared decision-making. While this approach was moderately effective with the comprehensive hiring process mentioned previously, we need to remind ourselves that substantive change and growth represent a choppy journey filled with joys and frustrations. Thus, instead of succumbing to negative influences--i.e., vowing never to serve on another committee--we should find ways of making the shared process work.

One important ingredient for effective shared decision-making is comprehensive training. At a New York school system, a newly appointed superintendent was charged with the responsibility of developing site-based teams. To carry out this charge effectively, he invited consultants from an educational support agency and from a private firm committed to site-based management. Through their cooperative

efforts, they were able to secure volunteers to serve as representatives for each building site and for the district-level steering committee. The volunteers were administrators, supervisors, teachers, and community members.

Initially, the district's board of education met for a weekend retreat to gain insights about the importance of shared decision-making and its potentially positive impact on the school system. Then, the site-based teams came together for districtwide presentations that focused on topics, such as how the plans, processes, and actions of teams evolve from a shared vision and mission. During these presentations, the insights and resources provided by the private firm were invaluable. They not only guided the teams' participants to cooperatively resolve authentic problems, but also helped the participants to never lose sight of their shared mission which was **to continually work toward improving all children's learning.** These successful outcomes set the stage for the teams to return to their respective buildings and to work toward achieving shared decision-making and consensus.

While this process was not perfect, it was an important step in the right direction. Thus far, the shared process has helped the key players to work in a collegial fashion when pursuing solutions to a wide variety of problems, ranging from hiring the best teachers and administrators to creating the best approaches for maintaining safety and discipline in the buildings. As with any new process, the site-based teams and the constituencies they represent are still struggling with issues related to ownership, empowerment, and accountability. Are there aspects of a site that are off limits to the team? When one site-based team agrees that content area curricula should be revised, does this decision cause a lack of equity in other schools within the district? What are the changing roles of the principal, superintendent, and board of education?

These are only a few of the questions that need to be addressed so that shared decision-making can continue to grow into a feasible process that positively affects the sites. Unless these and other issues are handled carefully, the sites will not develop the capacity to respond appropriately to local needs.

In retrospect, if educators, community members, and boards of education are genuinely interested in going beyond the rhetoric of promoting schools of excellence, then they must embrace the moral imperative of working cooperatively to achieve outcomes of excellence. Such cooperation involves defining important standards and finding ways of supporting these standards. This direction, of course, requires self-discipline, selflessness, and altruism, which fly in the face of individuals' predisposition toward professional jealousy, personal agendas, and self-serving interests (Sanacore, 1996, 1997). Although shared decision-making is neither a panacea nor a "one-best-way" solution to schools' complex problems, it can be used effecftively to complement other strategies for bringing the key players together to focus on children, our most precious consumers. Over time, individuals who refuse to grow with the shared process will be isolated and will lose their power to negatively influence the schools' vision and mission for excellence.

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